



A brief history of Emoji

Lauren Laverne:

With over 6 billion sent every day, emoji have gone truly global in the last few years. But where did they come from? And how on earth did we ever manage to communicate effectively in the pre-emoji era...?

Language first evolved around one hundred thousand years ago, allowing our ancestors to communicate simple ideas like 'fire' or 'cave'. Or more complex ideas like 'your cave is on fire'.

About five and a half thousand years ago writing was invented in Mesopotamia, when people started engraving symbols on clay tablets. This marked a major step forward for civilization, although wasn't entirely practical for sending love letters.

At the same time, in Egypt, people began scratching small picture symbols onto bone and ivory.

Five thousand years later, Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press, ensuring people could mass-produce documents and share radical ideas like Protestantism... and the recipe for Auntie Susan's vegetable broth.

In the nineteenth Century, the telegraph was invented...

Which led to an increase in long distance communication, as well as cases of Repetitive Strain Injury.

In the late twentieth century, the combination of the internet and mobile phone gave birth to the video call. So now you have to look ill as well as sound ill when you pull a sickie.

All of which, finally, bring us to the birth of the emoji!

So what exactly are emoji?

The word is made of the Japanese characters for 'picture writing'

They began life when their inventor noticed a craze for sending heart icons among Japanese teenagers...

... as well as among business men

Before emoji, 'emoticons' had let you express how you felt, by using combinations of punctuation marks

Now though there are emoji for almost everything. There are ones with different sexual orientations, skin tones, and genders in various roles, all purposefully designed to reflect a modern, multiculturally diverse society

And then there are less intuitive emoji like... The levitating business man....

And whatever this means

There's almost an emoji for everything... well apart from an emoji for emojis!

So what do people use them for?

When we talk to a huge amount of meaning is conveyed through gestures, facial expressions and tone of voice...

and this can get lost in written language, particularly as it becomes more colloquial. So what in the past might have been written as...

'Your hazel eyes remind me of a forest on the first days of autumn'

Might now be... 'U R well fit'

So in these modern times, being able to project feeling and emotion is especially important,

I puked in your car.